Coal plants are endangering United States

By Tim Wagner
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The editorial board in its Jan. 2 editorial on coal-based power and global warming hit the nail on the head. Barely. It missed a lot more of it.

It is true that as more municipalities say no to coal-fired power plants, like Intermountain Power, we need to get serious about energy efficiency and renewable sources. I would suggest, however, that it shouldn't be a forced choice but one we should embrace. For sound reasons.

First, as the board says, the science on global warming is beyond debatable, it's irrefutable. But not "nearly," as claimed. Just seeing the rise in fossil fuel use in the last 200 years paralleled with the rise in atmospheric CO2, from 280 ppm to over 380, I beg anyone to hedge their monthly salary on the claim that we are not the principal cause of climate change.

NASA scientist Dr. James Hansen, who likely has more credibility on this issue than anyone, has stated that we have about 10 years to start reducing CO2, that when we hit 450 ppm, it's irreversible.

To claim that it's still debatable is tantamount to doubting the hazards of smoking. Second, coal-based electricity is responsible for approximately 40 percent of all atmospheric CO2 worldwide. This is also irrefutable and not an "environmentalist" assertion as suggested. Intermountain Power's two 900-megawatt coal-burning units, for example, currently emit nearly 15 million tons annually. Its proposal for a third unit will increase that by approximately 50 percent. That equates into approximately 7,000 to 8,000 tons of CO2 per MW. (One MW provides for about 500 homes).

Keep in mind that IPP is one of approximately 1,100 similar power plants across the United States. Yet the industry wants to build about 150 additional plants, 20-plus here in the West. Most will be traditional coal-combustion units, not so-called clean coal technology with potential carbon sequestration.

Third, the Deseret Morning News mistakenly assumes coal as a better bet today. But that's today, literally. Those who believe that coal-based power will be the cheapest source even 10 years from now may have their head in the sand. Most within the energy sector agree that carbon caps and taxes are a reality of the not-so-distant future.

The coal industry likes to tout that there's over 200 years worth of coal in the ground. But many industry analysts also predict that if we continue business as usual and build those 150 additional plants, that supply shrinks to less than 20 years.

IPP and coal may seem cheap now but the future is far different. Carbon taxes, extra pollution control equipment, the disappearance of tax benefits for coal depletion, shrinking supplies and mining costs are just some of the variables that will add to the costs for residents and businesses. Yet none of these variables apply to efficiencies or renewables.

Only one other industry is experiencing the rate of change like the high-tech computer world: energy. Technologies and markets are transforming so quickly that I firmly believe that we are on the verge of a total energy revolution worldwide. If one looks at the projected increases over the next 5-10 years in baseload capability, efficiency and capacity factors, technological improvements like concentrated solar paired with thermal storage and five--megawatt wind turbines, compared to the rising costs in coal-based energy, one sees exactly why California venture capitalist and founder of Sun Microsystems Venod Klosha said recently at the national Solar Energy Industry Association convention, "Anyone who invests today in a coal plant is insane." Tim Wagner is director of the Utah Smart energy campaign for the Utah chapter of the Sierra Club.